

us of free passage on all its craft. By steamer, overtaking the prospectors' rowboats, we reached Yakutsk in eight days.

The scenery varied from forested hills to abrupt ravines with clearly visible outcrops of coal—the Lena coal fields, known in the eighteenth century and rediscovered by the Soviets in the 1930's. Many stretches along the Lena are dangerous for navigation because of rapids, shifting shoals, and treacherous turns. Such places were marked by huge black-and-white wooden shields on the shores. The helmsman followed the route indicated by a pair of shields until a new pair showed a change of direction.

When the steamer approached a particularly dangerous spot, boats with local pilots surrounded her, but our captain had no use for their services. After thirty years on the Lena, he trusted himself and his self-made map. It consisted of some two hundred sheets, each twelve by thirty inches long, glued together so that they formed a huge roll. The river was shown in the middle of the strip, without regard for points of the compass. Both banks of the river, its coves, islands, and branches were marked with local landmarks, such as unusual trees, rock formations, villages. The map had no distance scale but was divided into sections by the hours of a trip downstream. The captain had sketched this log during his first trip, so as to avoid paying tribute to the local pilots, and improved it each successive year.

We spent a few days in Yakutsk, waiting for the steamer to the Aldan and Maya. Yakutsk had a large colony of political exiles—perhaps a hundred or more in the town and as many in villages around it. Despite continuous denunciations by gendarmes, the local administration considered them the intellectual elite, and most of them had some professional or clerical job—in the power station (built by a political exile), regional museum, official newspaper and printing shop, schools, public library, and the like. The colony was avid for news and gave us a most cordial reception, but the city was depressing. The capital of a region four times as large as Germany and France combined, it had fewer than two thousand inhabitants and consisted of one-story log houses, set far apart, with endless fences flanking the wide dusty streets. The place looked dead—almost no traffic in the streets, few people on the wooden sidewalks, few trees and shrubs behind the fences. This was the season of northern white nights; it was as light at night as in the shade in daytime. But the suffocating heat of the day was followed by frost after sunset.

After Yakutsk, where the Lena is more than ten miles wide, the scenery became monotonous, with endless expanses of stormy gray water and endless taiga on the shores. The steamer halted at the mouth of the Aldan. There was a settlement somewhere not far from the land-